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## Armstrong Soccer Opens Season With Top-Ranked Clash

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### WOMEN'S SOCCER



### Armstrong Soccer Opens Season With Top-Ranked Clash





Posted: Aug 30, 2012

**ALLENDALE, Mich.** - The last time that the Grand Valley State University and Armstrong Atlantic State University women's soccer teams saw each other, it was at the NCAA Division II Final Four in Pensacola, Fla. Both teams saw their seasons end to eventual national champion College of St. Rose, putting a slight damper on an otherwise incredibly successful 2011 season for both the Lakers and the Pirates.

Fast forward eight months later and the Lakers and Pirates are about to see each other again, but as opponents as the preseason-ranked No. 3 Armstrong soccer squad makes the journey to Allendale, Mich., to take on the preseason No. 2-ranked Grand Valley State squad in a rare season-opening clash that features two of the top three ranked teams in the nation.

Defending national champion St. Rose is the preseason No. 1 team, but the Knights lost six of its 11 starters from the 2011 squad to graduation, possibly opening the door for both the Lakers and the Pirates to take the title in 2012.

For Grand Valley State, national contention is nothing new. Head coach Dave Dilanni directed the Lakers to back-to-back national championships in 2009 and 2010 and, going into the 2012 campaign, has amassed an unprecedented 94-4-3 home record since 2003.

Armstrong's ascendancy upon the national scene has been relatively recent. Head coach Eric Faulconer's program began play in 2005 and last season's trip to the NCAA Final Four was the first for the Pirates, after capturing the 2011 Peach Belt Conference regular season and tournament titles, as well as a first NCAA Southeast Region title. Incremental success has been the story for Armstrong as the Pirates won their first conference tournament title and NCAA match in 2009, first Peach Belt regular season title and hosted their first NCAA regional in 2010 before achieving new program firsts in 2011.

A big part of the rapid rise of the Pirate program has been a willingness to go out of the region and schedule difficult opponents.

"When we started the program in 2005, I came in with the philosophy that if we wanted to be nationally elite, we needed to play the hardest possible schedule that we could and play against some of the nation's best programs," Faulconer said. "We scheduled [South region foe] Tampa in 2006 and they took it to us 5-1, but it gave me an idea of where we needed to



go. Since that first game against UT, we have had a great run of successful seasons. In 2008, we beat Tampa on that very same field and many of those players played in the 2006 game. Wins like that can help change the culture of a program."

Traveling to the South Region to take on Tampa is one thing, but a trip to Michigan - which will be the longest trip the Armstrong soccer team has taken to date - to open up the season is something completely different. When approached with the idea of traveling to Grand Valley State to open the 2012 season with the Lakers, however, coach Faulconer was excited to present the challenge to his team.

"After making the Final Four last season, we are looking to take the next step as a perennial national title contender," Faulconer said. "I felt to do that, we needed to find the hardest possible game in the hardest possible environment and Grand Valley State affords us that opportunity. They are the premier NCAA Division II program in women's soccer, stronger than a majority of Division I programs, and we are excited about the challenge. Whatever the result, we will be a better team by making this trip. Perhaps we will see them again and that means that both programs would be having a pretty good season."

In Grand Valley State's recent run of national success, the Lakers have not shied away from tough competition at all. In 2008, the Lakers hosted top-ranked Tampa and beat the Spartans, 1-0, in the season-opener for both teams. The following year, Grand Valley State played in a season-opening tournament in Tampa where the Lakers played to a scoreless draw against No. 6-ranked Columbus State.

"Since I took the position as head coach at GVSU, I made it a point of looking to play the best competition possible for our teams to grow and be challenged," coach Dilanni said. "I believe that it helps our student-athletes understand the many obstacles they will face [during tough games] and to be able to overcome difficult opponents. We have the utmost respect for what Eric Falconer has accomplished at Armstrong Atlantic since he took over the program and what better way to start off both our seasons than to face one another in the opening weekend."

The 2009 season was a spectacular one for the Lakers as Grand Valley State went 22-0-4, culminating with the program's first national title in a 1-0 win over Cal State Dominguez Hills. Then-freshman Ashley Botts netted the game-winner and now the consensus first-team All-American forward leads a solid corps of eight returning starters from last year into the 2012 season.

Armstrong returns eight starters from 2011 as well, led by co-Peach Belt Conference Player of the Year forward Kristina Pascutti and PBC Tournament MVP Nadima Skeff. Understandably, both teams have been picked to capture their respective conference's regular season titles in preseason polls with Grand Valley State the unanimous selection to capture the GLIAC title while Armstrong was the unanimous pick to win the PBC.

Will the Lakers defend their impressive home pitch record and defeat the upstart Pirates to open the 2012 season, or will Armstrong pull off another upset and continue to climb the ladder to national prominence? Regardless of what happens, the August 31st clash between these two schools will have all the excitement and drama fitting of a Final Four matchup.



## ARMSTRONG STATE UNIVERSITY

11935 ABERCORN STREET, SAVANNAH, GA 31419

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CHAD JACKSON, DIRECTOR OF SPORTS COMMUNICATIONS. FOR MORE INFORMATION ON ARMSTRONG ATHLETICS, PLEASE CONTACT [CHAD.JACKSON@ARMSTRONG.EDU](mailto:CHAD.JACKSON@ARMSTRONG.EDU).